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GREAT AUDIENCES “ABSORB, ADOPT IT”: WALT WHITMAN’S “THE OLD BOWERY”

CATHERINE WAITINAS



“THESE ACTOR PEOPLE,” Walt Whitman confided to Horace Traubel, “always make themselves at home with me and always make me easily at home with them. I feel rather close to them—very close—almost like one of their kind.”¹ For Whitman, actors were “a noble set” who had “always entered keenly into his ‘emotionality and affection’”; he felt late in life that he “should esteem it a great triumph to have a clientele among the actors” (*WWWC*, 5:325). He claimed to have learned some of his own skills of verbal utterance from actors: “My custom was, in the old days, to listen sharply to the pronunciation, accent of the actors—then to stand by that—to stick to it—*absorb, adopt it*” (*WWWC*, 8:58, emphasis added). He was the ideal audience for these performers: engaged, attentive, admiring—and perpetuating—their performances with his own voice, as when he famously would recite Shakespeare in stagecoaches. Later, he would emulate the actors with his pen, anticipating a great audience of poetic readers who would perpetuate him.

Whitman’s pen *is* his voice—and so, too, are those of his audiences, in the vein of David Nowell Smith’s articulation that “poems’ soundworlds are constructed out of voice as material or medium; poems display, or stage, or generate, a ‘speaking voice,’ or speaking voices, as we readers, silently or aloud, are invited to ‘voice’ a poem.”² Whitman expects his reader to go beyond simply repeating his words. Rather, he “stages” dialogic interactions that invite responsive written utterance. I aim to show that he does so in the model of the theatre culture of his youth, enacted by him poetically in “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking”, as described at this essay’s conclusion, and then recalled in prose in his reminiscence, “The Old Bowery”, the primary focus of this essay. Readers, who are Whitman’s “Poets to Come”, are expected to “absorb, adopt” Whitman’s words, to answer the questions

asked within the poems, and then to respond—that is, to originate and voice new poems. I call this cycle Whitman’s *perpetuative utterance*, a death-transcending communion within the poetic medium that stands, as revealed by historical poetics, in direct opposition to the sort of solipsistic lyric navel-gazing of much Romantic and later poetry. Whitman’s poems, nearly to a text, invite the reader’s participation: his is, overall, an oeuvre of the anti-lyric. His poetry is not an indirect, overheard address to the reader but a non-lyric, *direct* address to and dialogic engagement *with* the reader.³ Yopie Prins has suggested that part of what we might achieve via historical poetics is to ascertain “how reading poems might connect us with other minds.”⁴ This mental link is exactly what Whitman seems to want with his own readers, whom he approaches in part with dialogic techniques common to the antebellum theatres of New York, especially the working-class Bowery Theatre of the 1830s and ’40s.

What I will show to be Whitman’s poetically theatrical “audience seats” are described, albeit not in a theatrical context, by Vincent J. Bertolini as “projected space[s] within which the reader’s subjective agency would be introjected within Walt Whitman’s poems.”⁵ But introjected by what, or whom? By the poem itself? If the reader’s agency is introjected within the poems, then his or her response would be unconscious, and the reader would lose his or her agency. This is exactly the opposite of what Whitman wants. Poetically, he looks always for heightened consciousness on the reader’s part—for increased alertness, responsiveness, and responsibility. Whitman also and always remains within the poem as an active partner—that is, as the actor playing to an audience; he “stops some where waiting” for the reader, after all. Bertolini asserts, “Whitman imagines the transformative power of lyric reading as resulting from a displacement of the speaker by a newly powerful, embodied reader. The speaker imagines himself as having ‘become invisible’ and addresses a ‘you, compact, visible, realizing my poems, seeking me’” (1053). It’s true that the reader “realizes” the poems and “seeks” the speaker, but herein lie multiple misreadings as well. First, by mistaking the dialogic register here for “lyric reading,” Bertolini discounts the power of the poetic conversation and of the reader’s responsive utterance.⁶ Further,

by pointing to the speaker as “invisible,” Bertolini indicates that the speaker has somehow disappeared, to be replaced—“displaced”—by the reader. But, “invisibility” in Whitman does not necessarily mean disappearance or displacement. For him, the invisible and the visible are simply different, coexisting planes of existence (“the unseen is proved by the seen/ Till that becomes unseen, and receives proof in its turn”). It is not that the reader displaces the speaker but that the reader *shares space with*—is in dialogue with—the speaker. The speaker-actor is still there, “listening,” as the reader-audience “answers” the poem’s questions.⁷

Whitman’s contemporary reviewers recognized his indebtedness to theatre culture, especially as represented by the Bowery as it existed when Whitman, a youth living on his own in Brooklyn, frequented the theatre. Starting with the famous frontispiece portrait that introduced the Whitmanian persona in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855), Whitman clothed the various iterations of his book in markers of Bowery culture that set the persona among the roughs rather than the rarified. A reviewer of Whitman’s first edition directly aligned the poet with the Bowery: “Walt is indeed ‘one of the roughs;’ for his picture would answer equally well for a ‘Bowery boy.’”⁸ To label someone as a Bowery type signaled a way of life, a certain kind of swagger for which the Bowery Theatre metonymically represented the neighborhood. In Joann Krieg’s words, “The ‘Bowery b’hoys,’ a city phenomena, were visible on the streets of New York as well as on its theater stages, so that one image fed into the other, erasing the line between them.”⁹ The Bowery and its denizens weren’t entirely reviled; as one reviewer noted in 1867, “with the extravagance, coarseness, and general ‘loudness’ of Bowery boys, Mr. Whitman possesses in an unusual degree their better traits”¹⁰: boisterous good spirits, camaraderie, energy.¹¹ It is from this Bowery—“the days of my greatest theatrical application,” he said (*WWWC*, 3:432), and the days when there was “no doubt the old actors played to the pit, not the upper part of the house” (*WWWC*, 8:58-59)—that Whitman poetically drew his theatrical influences. His poetry repeats the dialogic, participatory dynamics of this antebellum theatre, especially in his replication of the give and take between performer and audience, and their mutual

dependence.¹²

As Whitman recalled in “The Old Bowery,” a late-in-life essay once described as a “theatrical efflorescence,”¹³ he “always scann’d an audience as rigidly as a play.”¹⁴ Both actors and audiences took the play-script itself to be merely a starting point for an evening’s entertainment. Audiences were accustomed to playing integral and sometimes disorderly roles in their entertainment, and dialogue between performer and audience was a vital part of the experience, making the theatre an inventive and imaginative place for audiences as well as actors.¹⁵ As Alan Ackerman reports in his excellent study of nineteenth-century literature as “portable theatre,” “few people would have gone to the theatre had they not felt that they would be able to participate in some way in the process of performance and, therefore, in a sense, in the process of creation.”¹⁶ Ackerman identifies five constitutive features of this American theatre: a written play-text, a human voice or utterance, a gestural body, *mise-en-scene*, and an audience. But, he acknowledges that even if we enforce these requirements in categorizing performances, ultimately theatre is not a space so much as a set of conditions (xiv–xv). This distinction, which allows him to classify various nineteenth-century prose works, including some of Whitman’s prose, as “portable theater,” also allows us to consider Whitman’s poetry as such. Ackerman, who in a chapter on Whitman richly describes Whitman’s attraction to and immersion in the theatre throughout his life, as well as his development of actorly personae and poetic techniques, does not address the regular exchanges between actors and audiences in the antebellum theatre, or the importance of audience participation to Whitman’s poetics. It is these essential exchanges that predict the author : actor :: reader : audience dialogics of Whitman’s poetry.

In “The Old Bowery,” Whitman characterizes this as a truly golden age of American theatre expressly because of the essential roles of both actors and audiences, when “both players and auditors were of a character and like we shall never see again” (1192). He waxed nostalgic about the audience responses, “there never were audiences that paid a good actor or an interesting play the compliment of more sustain’d attention or quicker rapport” than those at the Bowery

(1190).¹⁷ Whitman's description of the Old Bowery crowds sounds not unlike one of his poetic catalogs:

Not but what there was more or less rankness in the crowd even then. For types of sectional New York those days—the streets East of the Bowery, that intersect Division, Grand, and up to Third Avenue—types that never found their Dickens, or Hogarth, or Balzac, and have pass'd away unportraited—the young ship-builders, cartmen, butchers, firemen (the old-time “soap-lock” or exaggerated “Mose” or “Sikesey,” of Chanfrau's plays,) they, too, were always to be seen in these audiences, racy of the East River and the Dry Dock. Slang, wit, occasional shirt sleeves, and a picturesque freedom of looks and manners, with a rude good-nature and restless movement, were generally noticeable.... Then at times came the exceptionally decorous and intellectual congregations I have hinted at; for the Bowery really furnish'd plays and players you could get nowhere else. (1190)

With the “rank,” “rude,” “good-nature[d],” and “restless” young “ship-builders, cartmen, butchers, firemen” of the crowd elbow-to-elbow with the “exceptionally decorous and intellectual congregations,” the Bowery was truly eclectic, electric, and egalitarian (at least for white men).¹⁸ The Bowery thus modeled for Whitman an ideal democratic nation that “allowed for the illusion at least of a kind of union or community but also of a sense in the theater (and not just on the stage) of the potential for public action” (Ackerman, 34). Whitman recalls:

the occasion of either [Edwin] Forrest or Booth, any good night at the old Bowery, pack'd from ceiling to pit with its audience mainly of alert, well dress'd, full-blooded young and middle-aged men, the best average of American-born mechanics—the emotional nature of the whole mass arous'd by the power and magnetism of as mighty mimes as ever trod the stage—the *whole crowded auditorium, and what seeth'd in it, and flush'd from its faces and eyes, to me as much a part of the show as any*—bursting forth in one of those long-kept-up tempests of hand-clapping peculiar to the Bowery—no dainty kid-glove business, but electric force and muscle from perhaps 2000 full-sinew'd men—(the inimitable and chromatic tempest of one of those ovations to Edwin Forrest, welcoming him back after an absence, comes up to me this moment—Such sounds and scenes as here resumed will surely afford to many old New Yorkers some fruitful recollections. (1189-1190, emphasis added)

“The Old Bowery” gives the audience, “as much a part of the show as

any,” far more attention than the plays themselves, which get almost no attention, or even the actors, who receive a great deal of attention—especially Junius Brutus Booth, discussed below—but still nowhere near as much as the audience. Whitman builds the same theatrical flexibility that he describes in “The Old Bowery,” the space for the reader-audience’s responsive, perpetuative utterance, into his poetry itself.

*

In his exhaustive classic study of Whitman and theatre, Floyd Stovall states somewhat regretfully that “it is difficult to point out specific examples” of Whitman’s affinity for the theatre in *Leaves of Grass*.¹⁹ In fact, however, such examples are embedded in the very spirit and structure of his poems, and in his prose as well. As David S. Reynolds points out in his essential *Walt Whitman’s America: A Cultural Biography* (1995), which nicely traces Whitman’s biographical involvement with the theatre, Whitman’s “interest in audience-performer intimacy explains his attraction to performers who crossed the boundary between themselves and their listeners” (58). Two of the performers best known for crossing this boundary were “the elder Booth” Junius Brutus, Whitman’s avowed favorite and a subject of much reflection in “The Old Bowery,” and Edwin Forrest, probably the most famous actor of his era.²⁰ Whitman admits that his experience as an audience member the night he saw Forrest perform “affected [him] for weeks” and, ultimately, for life: “I might say,” he adds, that this brief exposure to Forrest as a performer “permanently filter’d into my whole nature” (1188).²¹ This “filter[ing]” of Forrest’s nature into his own parallels Whitman’s poetic promise to “filter and fibre the blood” of his readers; he seems to see his poetic performances as penetrating the very beings of his readers in the same way that the antebellum theatrical performances entered into his own. These penetrations into the receiving audience-reader—perhaps the “merge” that so many critics have tried and failed to fully capture, and certainly part of perpetuative utterance—are the impetus in “Cradle,” as discussed below, for the creative birth of the “thousand songs . . . thousand warbling echoes” that “started to life within” the new poet, after the boy receives into

himself the love bird's sad songs.

Whitman's sense in 1888 was that "for the elderly New Yorker of to-day, perhaps, nothing were more likely to start up memories of his early manhood than the mention of the Bowery and the elder Booth" (1186). Later, while discussing this favorite with Traubel, Whitman anxiously regretted not being even more forceful about his admiration for the actor in his earlier reminiscences: "I attach a great deal of importance to Booth: . . . I may not have elaborated sufficiently in *November Boughs*: I in fact have felt things about Booth which I have not set down there or anywhere: he had much to do with shaping me in those earlier years" (WWWC, 4:286). Booth, Whitman reports in "The Old Bowery,"

stood out "himself alone" in many respects beyond any of his kind on record, and with effects and ways that broke through all rules and all traditions. He has been well describ'd as an actor whose instant and tremendous concentration of passion in his delineations overwhelm'd his audience, and wrought into it such enthusiasm that it partook of the fever of inspiration surging through his own veins. (1187)

Why were Booth's audiences so "overwhelm'd" by his performances and brought to a point where they "partook of the fever of inspiration surging through his own veins"? For Whitman, part of the answer was Booth's singular magnetic genius: he had his "own electric personal idiosyncrasy. (As in all art-utterance it was the subtle and powerful something *special to the individual* that really conquer'd)" (1192, emphasis in original). But Whitman also saw there was more to Booth's effectiveness than simply personal magnetism. Whitman reports that Booth was uniquely powerful because he performed "with effects and ways that broke through all rules and all traditions." His stage techniques, in other words, were revolutionary and radical—just as Whitman's poetic techniques would be two decades later. What precisely did these techniques consist of? For Whitman, one in particular stood out—and it reappears in his poetry.

Whitman just "happen'd to see what has been reckon'd by experts one of the most marvelous pieces of histrionism ever known. It must have been about 1834 or '35." He tells the story as if reliving the scene

in his mind, as if—like his poetry—it still exists in the present tense:

After a one-act farce over, as contrast and prelude, the curtain rising for the tragedy, I can, from my good seat in the pit, pretty well front, see again Booth's quiet entrance from the side, as, with head bent, he slowly and in silence, (amid the tempest of boisterous hand-clapping,) walks down the stage to the footlights with that peculiar and abstracted gesture, musingly kicking his sword, which he holds off from him by its sash. (1191)

The crowd, as they say, goes wild, with a “tempest of boisterous hand-clapping.” Whitman recalls that “fifty years have pass'd since then,” but the memory pulls him back and he returns to the present tense, where he “can hear the clank, and feel *the perfect following hush* of perhaps three thousand people waiting” (1191). This “hush”—in contradistinction to the previous boisterous applause—most distinguished Booth as not just an actor of his time but, in Whitman's estimation, as one for the ages. Whitman continues:

(*I never saw an actor who could make more of the said hush or wait, and hold the audience in an indescribable, half-delicious, half-irritating suspense.*) And so throughout the entire play, all parts, voice, atmosphere, magnetism, from ‘Now is the winter of our discontent,’ to the closing death fight with Richmond, were of the finest and grandest.... the great spell cast upon the mass of hearers came from Booth.... A shudder went through every nervous system in the audience; it certainly did through mine. (1191, emphasis added)

To the average twenty-first century reader, most of this passage would seem clear: Whitman admires the actors, their voices, the theatrical atmosphere, the dramatic sense. Even “magnetism,” which Whitman lists as equal to the “parts, voice, and atmosphere,” would still make sense in this context (although for Whitman, it almost certainly also referred to a mesmeric sort of magnetism). But what does Whitman mean when he says here that Booth “could make more [than any other actor] of the said hush or wait”?

What Whitman here calls the “hush or wait” was more commonly known to antebellum theatre-goers as the “point,” a theatrical technique eagerly watched for by antebellum audiences and “so called to indicate the ‘stops’ or pauses indicated by marks of punctuation, such as the period, comma, semi-colon, colon, etc.”²² On the antebellum

stage, “points” became “translations” of written punctuation into performed emphases—that is, “moments when a pause heightened the meaning or emotional impact of a spoken passage” (6). Whitman was much struck as an audience member by these points—so struck, in fact, that he ultimately reproduced them in his own poetry and, in so doing, also reproduced both the actorly assertion of power seen in the point simultaneously with the dialogic conventions of the antebellum theatre. Whitman wants us to talk back—but, sometimes, he also wants us to “hush,” perhaps as the boy in “Cradle” hushes himself in order to hear the love-birds sing.

As Whitman’s memories of Booth indicate, the point—or even just the anticipation of it by an alert audience—could heighten dramatic suspense and increase the entertainment value of any performance. Whitman remembered not only Booth but also his contemporary actor Barrymore as a master of the hush or point: “at one point the fellow stands—says, ‘What’s that?’: the effect was fine: I think it was Barrymore himself: the hush: oh! so few actors realize the power of silence, pause, surprise! and here was a demonstration” (*WWWC*, 1:465). One goal of this “silence, pause, surprise!” was, not surprisingly, to provoke the sort of adulation that audiences gave to those performances that become the stuff of legend—performances that might breathlessly be described by an audience member years later as “one of the most marvelous pieces of histrionism ever known.” This effect, Julia Walker tells us, was

the explicit goal of every actor who sought to create innovative ‘points.’ ... Their reward was the immediate applause of an appreciative audience who obliged them to step out of character in order to accept their thanks.... *The ‘point’ marked the extent to which actors commanded interpretive agency over the texts they performed.* (14, emphasis added)

For the actors, points were as much about power as they were about entertainment—power over text, audience, and other actors, who were obliged to pause in their delivery both for the point itself, the tension of the extended quiet hush, and for the auditory juxtaposition of the subsequent applause.

Even in his old age, Whitman continued to clearly remember

the effects of these hushes or points—even if he no longer remembered (or didn’t realize he remembered!) the exact words referring to them. Traubel tells us that Whitman, when discussing slang “among the theatrical people, the actors,” lost the sign but kept the sense of significance occasioned by a well-placed hush: “He half remembered one of their words—‘a very common often used word.’ His memory wouldn’t work. ‘I knew it well: it was a word signifying a hit, a take, a fetch—as when an actor *had made a point*, was applauded, brought down the house, as we say” (*WWWC*, 4:96-97, emphasis added). Whitman, seemingly unaware that he’s doing it, actually uses the term in question when he recalls that an actor “had made a point.” We see, too, in this example his recounting of the same phenomena of actorly control—and audience reverence—as in his other descriptions of the hush or pause. In addition to giving actors agency—they could adjust the language of the playtexts as well as their own deliveries of the words to try to create more and longer points and, thus, garner more “stage time”—points also gave *audiences* a means to exercise control over a performance. A well-placed “boo” or “hiss” during a point, for instance, could disrupt the actor’s delivery and dissolve any tension she or he was trying to build. Similarly, the extended “hush” the Bowery audience allowed Booth meant that this audience respectfully and admiringly ceded its cherished “right” to talk back, if only momentarily.²³

To translate this theatrical technique to his poetry, which benefits from neither a spoken voice nor silence per se, and to help to create his perpetuative utterance, Whitman in 1855 uses punctuation and spacing—visual cues—to indicate where points, or meaningful pauses, occur. In addition to emphasizing “what has just been said,” his points stress what is to come. We know, because of his reading of Booth, that in his prose Whitman calls the “point” the “hush.” He uses this term in his poetry as well. Shortly after the explicitly theatrical line “the actor and actress . . . those through with their parts and those waiting to commence,” this passage appears: “Every condition promulges not only itself . . . it promulges what grows after and out of itself, / And the dark hush promulges as much as any. / They are but parts, any thing is but a part” (*Complete*, 81). With the evocative and unusual

verb “promulge,” he tells us that his “dark hush” is something that “publishes” or “teaches.” In other words, the hush provides lessons about “what grows after and out of itself.” What are these lessons that we can find in Whitman’s hushes, or points? What can we find growing “after” and “out of” them? And, where are these points in his poetry?

Conveniently, one such point is located in these very lines. Whitman here uses a theatrical metaphor, the idea of “parts” or roles, to point us to a theatrical poetic strategy. By placing ellipses after the phrase “every condition promulges not only itself,” he creates a “point” that gives the reader “thinking space” and invites the reader to ponder (and appreciate?) the previous line. The reader might ask, “*what does [every condition] promulge in addition to itself?*” After the elliptic point, the speaker offers an explanation: “it promulges what grows after and out of itself.” That is, every condition promulges—teaches—both its product and its progeny. After another elliptic point, the speaker comes to his “aha!” moment: the revelation that the “dark hush promulges as much as any.” That is, the “point”—the seemingly empty space—is as meaningful as anything else: it, too, promulges its product and progeny. In Whitman’s poetry, then, the empty spaces can carry as much meaning as the lines of text.²⁴

While not every series of ellipses in Whitman’s poems marks a point, many do, and they serve multiple functions. The point can allow a term (in this case, “moving”) to remain undetermined for a moment until the speaker further defines it. This, in turn, allows the speaker to subvert the reader’s assumptions and expectations: “In me the caresser of life wherever moving . . . backward as well as foreward sluing” (37). Because life generally isn’t perceived as moving “backward” (even if “time avails not”), the ellipses prepare the reader for other subverted expectations. The point can also mark the contrast between when the speaker merely describes an object versus when he admires one: “The young fellow drives the express wagon . . . I love him though I do not know him” (39). It can show the speaker’s frenzy—he is out of control, unable to rein himself in with traditional punctuation: “I talk wildly . . . I have lost my wits . . .” (56). It can indicate the speaker’s fluid and continual phys-

ical or psychic movement, as in a vision: “I skirt the sierras . . . my palms cover continents” (59).

With the poetic point, then, Whitman can be an actor who uses the “hush” to heighten the tension of his performance, but Whitman does more with the point than emphasize his own voice or agency. Walker acknowledges that by giving interpretive agency to actors, the point redirected audience attention away from playwrights and toward actors, a transference that marked “the moment of the actor’s ascent” in nineteenth-century theatre history (19). But, points also affected audience reactions to performances, in part by giving audiences a new way to show appreciation or engagement—that is, with silence rather than with noise. Just as the theatrical point gave power to antebellum audiences, the poetic point allows Whitman’s reader a certain amount of agency. It can provide “poetic time” for the reader to puzzle out a difficult line: “Have you worked so hard to get at the meaning of poems?” (28). Perhaps before she or he reads the second half of this next poetic statement, the reader has come to an understanding of what it means to be “integral” with the speaker: “I am integral with you . . . I too am of one phase and of all phases” (48). It can allow the reader opportunity to digest a term (“satisfied”), perhaps recalling the speaker’s other uses of the same term, before seeing it demonstrated: “I am satisfied . . . I see, dance, laugh, sing” (29). It can give the reader time to follow an instruction: “Undrape . . . you are not guilty to me, nor stale nor discarded” (33). It can stoke the reader’s imagination, sometimes to heighten sexual tension: “Dash me with amorous wet . . . I can repay you” (48).

Whitman’s poetic point thus encourages the reader to participate by actively listening, “pausing,” and thus considering what she or he has read; Whitman recalled that as an actor “Booth always drew the best hearers,” and he wanted the same (1190). But the point is, well, only the starting point for Whitman’s theatrical poetics, which also construct poetic sites for reader response that enable a poet-reader exchange. Literally, Whitman makes poetic room for the reader to reply. These poetic sites are akin to the open spaces actors knew audiences would fill with sound or, as we have seen with the point or hush, with silence, in the antebellum theatre. Throughout *Leaves of Grass*,

when “you” refers to the reader, there’s nearly always a space for the reader’s reaction at the end of the line or stanza. The speaker and reader do not crowd each other out. Whitman’s poetry is replete with questions—question after question after question—many of which are followed by blank spaces, which we can consider the audience’s seats of his poems. From these seats, the reader-audience can shout back to the speaker-actor.²⁵

To demonstrate Whitman’s interrogative, dialogic theatrical poetry more clearly, I want briefly to walk through the 1855 edition.²⁶ It contains 79 total “interrogatives,” by which I mean individual questions as well as series of related, adjacent questions within one stanza. Each of the following is a single interrogative: “Who need be afraid of the merge?” (33) counts as one, just as the following lines count together as one: “Do you take it I would astonish? / Does the daylight astonish? or the early redstart twittering through the woods? / Do I astonish more than they?” (45). The last three lines count as one interrogative because they’re not interrupted by a declarative statement. However, if two questions within one stanza are separated by a declarative statement, they each count as a separate interrogative.²⁷ Fifty-four of the 79 interrogatives—the clear majority, that is—are open-ended questions, or *open interrogatives*. Open space—room for reader response—appears after each of them in the form of a traditional stanza break. These questions demand things from the reader, but, like the antebellum theatre, they also give the reader-audience *agency*. Open interrogatives can be divided into categories. Some open interrogatives apostrophize non-sentient objects: “Earth! You seem to look for something at my hands, / Say old topknot! what do you want?” (72), while those directed toward the reader vary wildly in tone and content. Many seem casual, conversational, asking the reader to examine his or her memory to recall personal history or acquired knowledge: “Did you read in the seabooks of the oldfashioned frigate-fight? / Did you learn who won by the light of the moon and stars?” (67). Others prod the reader a bit more insistently, asking him or her to provide an opinion on a controversial but also, usually, intimate topic. In this case, for instance, what does the reader imagine comes after death?: “What do you think has become of the young

and old men? / And what do you think has become of the women and children?" (32). The open interrogatives venture even further into the reader's personal space by asking probing questions about private matters: "Your mother . . . is she living? . . . Have you been much with her? and has she been much with you? / Do you not see that these are exactly the same to all in all nations and times all over the earth?" (124). Or, to return more demanding and intrusively to the topic of death: "Have you guessed you yourself would not continue? Have you dreaded those earth-beetles? / Have you feared the future would be nothing to you?" (100).

As if the forced intimacy of these very personal questions were not enough, other open interrogatives actually insult the reader. They reveal a suspicious and ornery speaker who suspects the worst: "Do you know so much that you call the slave or the dullface ignorant? / Do you suppose you have a right to a good sight . . . And he or she has no right to a sight?" (122). Why does this speaker openly mock his reader, when he desperately seeks union and dialogue? It seems here as if he batters the reader, in an attempt to wrangle a response out of him or her.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, many open interrogatives seek to prove that the speaker-reader connection is real. The speaker wants to know that he and the reader are, essentially, a team: "Will you speak before I am gone? Will you prove already too late?" (87). He continually reinforces his common humanity with the reader—and he continually acknowledges the reader, "you," as audience: "What is a man anyhow? What am I? and what are you?" (45). Finally, he continually reminds the reader that they share the same (textual) space: "Will the whole come back then? / Can each see the signs of the best by a look in the lookingglass? Is there Nothing greater or more? / Does all sit there with you and here with me?" (94).

In the decades following his first publications of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855 and 1856, Whitman moved beyond subtly building participation into his poetry and began to actually *explain* his dialogic strategies in addition to employing them. He expects "the main things" from his reader: "I am a man who, sauntering along, without fully stopping, turns a casual look upon you, and then averts his face, / Leaving it

to you to prove and define it, / Expecting the main things from you” (“Poets to Come,” 1860, 187). He is openly foisting poetic responsibility onto the reader. With the publication of *Democratic Vistas* (1871), he clarifies what this rather aggressive charge to the reader means: “For know you not, dear, earnest reader, that the people of our land may all read and write, and may all possess the right to vote—and yet *the main things* may be entirely lacking?” (*Complete*, 932, emphasis added). He suggests in 1871 that the primary absence—the main thing, that is, that’s prevented America from achieving its greatness—is its inadequate national *literature*. His words on this count are worth quoting at length:

Our fundamental want to-day in the United States, with closest, amplest reference to present conditions, and to the future, is of *a class, and the clear idea of a class, of native authors, literatures*, far different, far higher in grade than any yet known, sacerdotal, modern, fit to cope with our occasions, lands, permeating the whole mass of American mentality, taste, belief, breathing into it a new breath of life, giving it decision, *affecting politics far more than the popular universal suffrage, with results inside and underneath the elections of Presidents or Congresses*—radiating, begetting appropriate teachers, schools, manners, and, as its grandest result, accomplishing (what neither the schools nor the churches and their clergy have hitherto accomplish’d, and without which this nation will no more stand, permanently, soundly, than a house will stand without its substratum), a religious and moral character beneath the political and productive and intellectual bases of the States. (*Complete*, 932, emphases added)

A national literature should be America’s foundation (“substratum”). Literature itself *means* and *matters*, all on its own, without needing reference to politics. An “adequate” and “permeating” national literature would be diffuse: it would reach people inside of their heads and, he might even say with one of his favorite words, inside of their souls.²⁸ And this is why he needed to create the new generation of Poets to Come.

The dialogic practices of Whitman’s beloved antebellum theatre had not survived even into the 1850s when Whitman first published *Leaves of Grass*, much less into the 1870s when he wrote *Democratic Vistas*, but his poems could reproduce them. His dialogic dyad of speaker-actor and reader-audience would allow his (and, importantly, others’—his readers’) literature to move beyond the individual

to the collective. Poets in America thus would be the unacknowledged legislators of the world, with their texts reaching and shaping the people, including the acknowledged legislators, by penetrating their interiorities. The great (moral) poem would create the great (moral) reader-audience who would then become the great (moral) poet-citizen—perhaps even the great (moral) president—or Prostitute, in Whitman’s paratactically arranged catalogic universe. Within the parameters of his own poetic theories of the moral Whitmanian “universe” (the single poem that is made up of the diverse—perhaps the diverse reader-poets who will perpetuate him?), Whitman’s main responsibility is to help produce these future poets.

In one of the most passionate exhortations in all biographical accounts of Whitman’s conversations, he tells Horace Traubel:

“When you get in such a talk again, Horace, give out these ideas, give them as from me—authoritatively—let your note be heard. *For here is the kernel—this is the seat of the explanation: the tremendousest let-fly in this, our history here, perhaps in all literature. Understand me, I mean that men shall proceed in all they do out of a knowledge of life—as great actors act, orators speak, singers sing—as in Alboni’s voice, perhaps the greatest singer ever breathed—as in Booth—the old Booth—I don’t know but the grandest actor the world has seen or will see—as in Ingersoll—voice, vitality, and so on—full—overflowing—with accumulation of fact, feeling, actual palpitating experience—crowded into them, as crowded into me, by resistless forces of a proud pure ancestry—intricately woven from hardy, to hardy, purposes—splendid effects.*” And at this moment, after throwing all this out in a voice and with gesture powerful and fine, he sank back in his chair, closed his eyes, “And now I have talked too much! But you know, Horace, a man can’t always be good. *And I want you to take this with you—assert it anywhere for me—make it felt as my message, declaration.*”

And as I said my good-bye, he picked up Truth—waved his hand as I went out the door—and turned towards the light. (WWWC, 8:179-180, emphasis added)

*

Whitman described his experiences among the members of antebellum theatre audiences as “the things, indeed, I lay away with my life’s rare and blessed bits of hours, reminiscent, past—the wild sea-storm I once saw one winter day, off Fire island—the elder Booth in Richard, that famous night forty years ago in the old Bowery.”²⁹ Walter Grünz-

weig identifies this—or at least a very similar—night as fundamental to Whitman’s idea of himself as an artist:

In the evening, theaters opened up. In the huge bowery, for instance, holding 3,000 spectators, famous English guest stars played to an audience of raving, roaring workers and craftsmen enthusiastically applauding. There played the famous Booth, whom the 15-year-old Whitman had a first chance to see as Richard III. *Whitman for the first time in his life was thrilled by the impact of the artistic expression, the spoken word, the inspired gesture. In retrospect only are we able to grasp the intense emotion which was thus stirred up in the boy. We can imagine how he must have been impressed by the living word, he who, until late in his life, believed in his vocation as an orator as well as a poet, a great popular orator who with his powerful voice would lead the American people, would master them.*” (emphasis added)³⁰

Whitman recreated this artistic thrill and awakening in a natural (poetic) theatre in “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,”³¹ which shows the extent to which the theatre informed Whitman’s poetic project of perpetuative utterance. “Cradle” is itself a theatrical set-piece that functions as a mini-play, which is, perhaps, why Whitman chose to first publish it in the *New-York Saturday Press*, which was the paper of choice for many actors and actresses among the bohemian crowds.³² It is also the poem in which Whitman tells the story of his speaker-persona’s own poetic genesis—as well as the poem in which Whitman most clearly depicts his ideal relationship between an actor (the bird) and an audience (the boy). Although it first appeared in *Leaves of Grass* in 1860—the same year as “Poets to Come”—“Cradle” is set decades earlier, during the speaker’s youth on the Atlantic shore. The poem features a robust cast of characters: the adult speaker; the young boy, a “child leaving his bed . . . alone, bareheaded, barefoot” (*Complete*, 388), along with the male bird; the female bird; the sea itself. These characters play clearly demarcated parts, indicated by roman or italic typesetting (Whitman, once a typesetter, knew how to visually differentiate voices on a page). The action takes place in a specific locale called “the scene,” described well enough for any stage or set designer to reproduce it: “Out of the Ninth-month midnight, / Over the sterile sands and the fields beyond . . . / Out from the patches of briars and blackberries, . . . / From under that yellow half-moon

late-risen and swollen.” As the curtain rises, the speaker introduces the action by tearfully returning to his childhood:

A man, yet by these tears a little boy again,
Throwing myself on the sand, confronting the waves,
I, chanter of pains and joys, uniter of here and hereafter,
Taking all hints to use them, but swiftly leaping beyond them,
A reminiscence sing. (*Complete*, 388)

The poem brings together the speaker’s past as boy and present as man with his connection to the future, figured as “the here and hereafter.” This transcendence of time is essential to Whitman’s perpetuative poetics, which are revolutionary in part because, unlike a physical theatre, they aren’t limited by temporal or material constraints.

As the speaker recalls his childhood observation of the lover-birds by the shore, he recounts two events that stress the importance of union or connection in Whitman’s poetry. First, the boy invites the bird into a relationship by addressing it apostrophically: “Demon or bird! (said the boy’s soul)” (392). Second, the boy comes to believe the bird is addressing him as well: “Is it indeed toward your mate you sing? or is it really to me?” Thus, the boy’s poetic career, his moment of artistic baptism, begins in a moment not of solitary inspiration but one of conversation and communion with a fellow-poet, the bird:

For I, that was a child, my tongue’s use sleeping, now I have heard you,
Now in a moment I know what I am for, I awake,
And already a thousand singers, a thousand songs, clearer, louder, and more
sorrowful than yours,
A thousand warbling echoes have started to life within me, never to die.

It is only when the boy (at this point the *audience-reader*) communes with the bird (at this point the *actor-singer-poet*) that the “thousand songs” within him stir to life and he recognizes the irrevocability of his mission, his personal teleology, his “destiny.” It is only at this point of communion, that is, that the boy-audience *becomes* the new actor—the new poet. In his moment of poetic initiation, the boy does not yet know for what or whom he sings. Although his mission still hasn’t been clarified, he can nonetheless declare the poet’s ineluctable role.

He is born out of (“projected by”) and indebted to (“never more shall I cease perpetuating you”) the songbird with whom he identifies:

O you singer solitary, singing by yourself, projecting me,
O solitary me listening, never more shall I cease perpetuating you,
Never more shall I escape, never more the reverberations,
Never more the cries of unsatisfied love be absent from me,
Never again leave me to be the peaceful child I was before what there in the
 night,
By the sea under the yellow and sagging moon,
The messenger there arous’d, the fire, the sweet hell within,
The unknown want, the destiny of me. (*Complete*, 393)

The bird—a one-time “singer solitary”—and the boy—heretofore a “solitary me”—are now linked in a never-ending cycle of projection and perpetuation that serves as a model for the speaker’s relationship to his readers, his “Poets to Come,” whom he will “project” and who will never cease to “perpetuate” him.³³

The moment of poetic origin depicted in “Cradle” is the moment when perpetuative utterance begins. In this moment of creative nativity, the boy literally can’t resist his poetic purpose. He is “arous’d”—suggestive of arising from sleep as well as sexual excitation—and his “destiny” is revealed. He loses forever (“Never again”) his previous existence as a “peaceful child” with an “unknown want,” because the bird—the original “messenger” of this drive to create—has lit the fires of “the sweet hell within,” a poetic life in which he must repeat again and again “the cries of unsatisfied love.” It isn’t enough for him simply to watch another singer, to be the audience: he must become a singer himself. But he knows this only because *he has been the audience*, “absorb”[ing] and “adopt”[ing] the influence of the actors just as Whitman did at the Old Bowery.

This same state of restless seeking and, perhaps, restless “singing”—this inability to be a mere passive observer—is what Whitman desires of his readers, his Poets to Come, not as they witness a mournful birdsong but as they read and become “arous’d” by his poetry. By creating his own songs in response to the bird, the boy-then-speaker shows readers as an audience how to respond to Whitman’s poetic performances. His song-poems, born out of

creative compulsion, inspired by his experience as *audience*, hold and unify multiple internal identities and voices, represented by a thousand reader-singers—in other words, a thousand performers. And here “a thousand songs” is subordinate to “a thousand singers”: these future thousand songs issue not from the speaker-poet but from his “Poets to Come” that will follow him. These readers are all audiences-turned-actors, unified in the body of his single verse—a verse that must be responded to, and perpetuated, not merely read. The reader must be prepared to take some responsibility: “Nor is it by reading it you will acquire it” (“Whoever You Are Holding my Now in Hand,” 271). Mere reading is too passive and too easy: it is simply not enough—a perpetuative *audience*, in short, is always more than just a reader.

Whitman does far more in his poetry in the theatrical vein than simply create poetic *dramatis personae*, or even replicate actorly points or hushes. It is specifically the dialogic conventions of—and, thereby, the politics of—the Bowery that he closely mimics, especially in his insistence on the reader-audience’s centrality to the text-performance. He renders his reader-audience indispensable to the poetic text-performance, just as the audiences of antebellum theatrical performances were essential to the evening’s entertainment. He seeks in his poetry to teach his reader-audiences how to create a new poetic space of exchanged, and sometimes even overlapping, utterance. He attempts to capture the interplay between speaker and audience, to create a transcendence of temporal and spatial boundaries, to inspire a perpetuative utterance that was possible in most of his lifetime (before the advent of the phonograph) only with published literature, not of performed or spoken literature. The materiality of the text matters here; it allows Whitman to address “whoever it is holding me now in hand.” It is, I would argue, a primary distinguishing characteristic of his literary project, something essential that he refuses to let us forget.

Whitman struggled to understand how actors could pretend to be “on”—how, in fact, they could *act* what they did not feel:

I have always had one question for actors: a question they have never answered, however: I put it to them this way: How is it that whatever the conditions—sick, worried, fagged out, grumpy—they can turn their backs on the common life, away from distractions, and engage in the new role at once: everything thrown off but the tragedy, comedy, whatnot of the moment. (WWWC, 3:519)

Whitman couldn't get outside of himself to comprehend how an actor could escape himself—his identity, his feelings, his immediacy—well enough to convincingly portray the character at hand. But in his poetry, he didn't have to be "on" except in the moment of writing or inspiration. As such, the Whitmanian poetic "theatre" continues even now to host a speaker-persona who can build multiple, intimate, and dialogic unions with not only contemporary but also future reader-audiences, even after the poet's death. Thus Whitman's revolutionary poetry, unlike the Old Bowery and its ilk, remains still a kind of participatory microcosm, a space of spirited engagement where Whitman and the reader unite in perpetuative utterance.

In "Cradle," the young boy awakens to his poetic vocation because he is inspired by the actor/songbird to become a singer himself, always perpetuating and projecting the birdsong for new audiences. As Chanita Goodblatt has suggested, the interplay between the boy, the bird, and the sea in "Cradle" marks the beginning of the "breaking of the monologic hegemony of the lyric voice."³⁴ Whitman's utterances will become the readers' utterances, but not via *replication*. Their songs will be different—but, in their difference, they will *perpetuate* him and his literary mission.

Whitman's investment in poetry is not merely as a vehicle to get at other issues; it is an investment in utterance itself, his own and his readers', as we see with the utterances of both the birds and the boy (and even the ocean) in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking." It is, too, an investment in "jetting the stuff of new republics" into his readers; the "Poets to Come" and not his falsely claimed six children are his progeny. In another poem about the beach at night, these future poets are represented by a young girl:

On the beach at night,
 Stands a child with her father, . . .
 . . . holding the hand of her father. . . .

Something there is,
(With my lips soothing thee, adding I whisper,
I give thee the first suggestion, the problem and indirection,)
Something there is more immortal even than the stars. . . . (*Complete*, 398-399)

“Something there is,” the speaker tells his child—Whitman’s poetic progeny—“more immortal even than the stars.” Perhaps this something is a voice, a song, a poem, passing from one “actor” to another, in the Whitmanian cycle of perpetuative utterance.

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NOTES

1 Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, 1:5. All nine volumes of *With Walt Whitman in Camden* are available on the *Walt Whitman Archive* (whitmanarchive.org).

2 David Nowell Smith, *On Voice in Poetry: The Work of Animation* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 1.

3 There are exceptions, particularly in some of the Civil War poetry, such as “Come up from the Fields, Father” or, especially, “The Dresser”/“The Wound-Dresser,” in which Whitman actually tells the reader to “follow without noise.”

4 Whitman’s poetry is not a lyric “utterance overheard” by the reader but a direct engagement between the poet and the reader. See Prins, “What Is Historical Poetics?” in *Modern Language Quarterly* 77 (2016), 22; and “Historical Poetics, Dysprosody, and *The Science of English Verse*,” *PMLA* 123 (2008), 229-234.

5 Vincent J. Bertolini, “‘Hinting’ and ‘Reminding’: The Rhetoric of Performative Embodiment in *Leaves of Grass*,” *ELH* 69 (Winter 2002), 1047-1082 (1044).

6 See Dana Phillips, “Whitman and Genre: The Dialogic in ‘Song of Myself,’” *Arizona Quarterly* 50 (Autumn 1994), 31-58. Phillips uses Bakhtin to argue that the dialogic coexists with the practice of “fusion” in Whitman’s poems. The problem with this characterization is that if two individuals fuse into one, dialogue becomes impossible.

7 Bertolini's concept of *lyric hinting*, one of the few readings of Whitman's poetry that appreciates it as performative, underappreciates the full extent of the reader's agency—of the reader, that is, as *participatory* audience:

The notion of lyric hinting encourages the reader to think of meaning as deep content obscured to one's immediate perception. The speaker's use of the term ["hint"] in effect charges the reader with the task of searching after, guessing at, attempting to 'hit' 'that which' will be 'use[ful]' to know, the learning of which will have some practical utility for her/him. The idea of hinting, that is, engages the reader's interpretive agency, linking it to the poet's communicative efforts, thus setting the reader on the path to understanding his poetry. (1060)

He implies here that there is one stable if hidden meaning—"deep content obscured to [the] reader's immediate perception"—embedded within the poetry's language. However, Whitman does more (and less) than "set the reader on the path to understanding his poetry." He cedes *more* power to the reader, and he does so by providing *less* information or guidance, which subsequently leads to potential multiplicities of meaning. As he writes in "Poets to Come," he leaves "the main things" to the reader; in "Cradle," he provides a theatrically-inflected template for this mutuality and multiplicity of meaning-production.

8 [Anonymous], "[Review of *Leaves of Grass* (1855)]," *The Washington Daily National Intelligencer* (February 18, 1856), 2. Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive*.

9 *Walt Whitman and the Irish* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), 59. Also available on the *Walt Whitman Archive*. As Kenneth M. Price has noted, "To hang the label of the 'Bowery' on Whitman ... suggested a broad-reaching contamination: commentators who mentioned the Bowery did so to condemn Whitman through association with immigrant groups, moral degeneracy, and working-class culture." See *To Walt Whitman, America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 29.

10 A.S. Hill, "[Review of *Drum-Taps*]," *The North American Review* 104 (January 1867), 301-303. Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive*.

11 Whitman also was fond of the Park Theatre of his youth, describing it as "my university. I got Lord knows how much from those years!" (WWWC, 9:140). But, he reminisced much more frequently about his experiences at the Bowery, and his poetry more closely replicates Bowery practices.

12 This give-and-take differentiated the theatre from the opera, another important influence on Whitman's poetry, where audiences were well-behaved. For a sampling of the wide-ranging discussion of Whitman's poetry as operatic, including its use of the recitative and the aria and in part regarding "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," see William F. Mayhan, "The Idea of Music in 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,'" in *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 13 (Winter 1996), 113-128; Donald Barlow Stauffer, "Opera and Opera Singers," in

The Walt Whitman Encyclopedia, ed. J.R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings (New York: Garland, 1998), 484-486; and Robert D. Faner's *Walt Whitman & Opera* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1951).

13 W. Harrison, "Walt Whitman's 'November Boughs,'" *The Critic* n.s. 11 (January 19, 1889), 25. Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive*.

14 Walt Whitman, "The Old Bowery," *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982), p. 1190 in the hardcover edition. "The Old Bowery" appears in the paperback edition, pp. 1209-1216. Abbreviated *Complete*.

15 For more on the history of antebellum theatre, see Lawrence Levine's *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 1990; David Grimsted's *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theater and Culture, 1800-1850* (University of California Press, 1988); Sean Wilentz's *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press), 1984; and David S. Reynolds's *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (Vintage), 1995.

16 Alan Ackerman, *The Portable Theatre: American Literature and the Nineteenth-Century Stage* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 36.

17 Whitman frequently was among these audiences, as Floyd Stovall has assiduously outlined by listing the plays, actors, locations, and other details of a great number of the great many productions Whitman saw in the 1830s and 1840s. See Stovall, "Walt Whitman and the Dramatic Stage in New York," *Studies in Philology* 50 (July 1953), 515-539.

18 Walt Whitman, *The Journalism. Volume 1: 1834-1846 and Volume II: 1846-1848*, ed. Herbert Bergman, Douglas A. Noverr, and Edward J. Recchia. New York: Peter Lang, 2003. *Journalism II*, 296.

19 Stovall, "Walt Whitman and the Dramatic Stage in New York," *Studies in Philology* 50 (July 1953), 515-539.

20 The "younger" Booths were Edwin and his brother John Wilkes, a celebrity actor in his own day but remembered today, of course, primarily as Lincoln's assassin. While the majority of the lines regarding actors in "The Old Bowery" are devoted to Booth, Whitman also recalls seeing Forrest at the Bowery, although he seems loathe to cede any ground to him as superior to Booth. He writes almost defensively that "certainly the main 'reason for being' of the Bowery Theatre those years was to furnish the public with Forrest's and Booth's performances—the latter having a popularity and circles of enthusiastic admirers and critics fully equal to the former" (emphasis added). Whitman, "The Old Bowery," 1189.

21 Forrest's effect on Whitman may not be surprising, as his stage persona was reputed to be the era's best—and certainly its most recognizable—embodiment of Jacksonian democracy. Forrest was best known for playing all of his parts as

a “Jacksonian hero” whose “physically expressive style was deemed by many to be *distinctly* American.... [he] was often taken to represent America itself” (Julia Walker 25–26).

22 Julia Walker, *Expressionism and Modernism in the American Theatre: Bodies, Voices, Words* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 17.

23 Whether or not a point was effective thus depended not only on an actor’s skill but also on the audience’s indulgence of the pause—and sometimes this indulgence (or lack thereof) was produced as much by the audience’s perception of the actor *qua* person as by its opinion of the performance. In other words, what an audience knew about an actor, especially his or her politics, often affected its reaction to the performance. At the Old Bowery, actors such as Booth or Forrest, who were seen to embody Jacksonian democracy (and, as such, were Whitman’s favorites), were heroes to the audiences—and so they were accorded hushes, as well as cheers, as reward. In short, the ways in which actors used points indicated both artistic decisions and political positions—and so, too, did the ways in which audiences framed their responses. One of the more spectacular demonstrations of audience power at the end of this era of theatre productions was the Astor Place Riot of 1849, which was related specifically to audience impressions of actorly politics and of their own role in responding, *as* audiences, to said actors. It may have been this violent riot, in fact, which brought the era of audience centrality to an end. As Whitman described it, it was a place featuring not only “the hurrahs for popular favorites” but also—and, note, following one elliptical poetic point and producing another—“the fury of roused mobs” (*Complete*, 34). Forrest was at the center of this riot, the “watershed event in the life of the American theatre,” and yet it is Booth who receives the bulk of Whitman’s attention in “The Old Bowery.” For more on the riot, see Ackerman and Sean Wilentz.

24 C. Carroll Hollis has argued that Whitman’s ellipses in the 1855 edition employ the “rhetorical pause,” a technique employed by nineteenth-century orators, not actors. He focuses on the speaker’s agency *in pausing* rather than on the auditors’ agency in *allowing the pause*. See Hollis, “Rhetoric, Elocution, and Voice in *Leaves of Grass*: A Study in Affiliation,” *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 2 (Fall 1984), 1–21.

25 For evidence of the effectiveness of this technique, we need look no farther than the hundreds of poems in which later poets—Whitman’s readers—do, indeed, shout back, perhaps most famously represented by Ezra Pound’s “I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman, / I have detested you long enough.” See *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song*, ed. Jim Perlman, Ed Folsom, and Dan Campion (Duluth, MN: Holy Cow!, 1998).

26 After 1855, Whitman continues to add passages that combine interrogatives with reader spaces. For example, in 1860: “Who is he that would become my follower? / Who would sign himself a candidate for affections? Are you he?”; “Are

you the new person drawn toward me, and asking something significant of me?"; "Who is now reading this?"; and "Mind you the timid models of the rest, the majority?" Not surprisingly, all of these lines come from the "Calamus" poems, which among Whitman's post-bellum poetry are the most dialogic of his texts, the most insistent on pursuing and maintaining via Whitmanian cameraderie an intimate relationship between poet and reader. In all editions after 1855, Whitman removes the ellipses in "Song of Myself," which tracks with other changes (such as the addition of section numbers) that make the poem more conventional and actually function to decrease the potential reader-responsiveness of the poem.

27 Twenty-five of Whitman's 79 interrogatives are *closed*: after each of these 25 questions, Whitman does not leave room for reader response. Some of the closed interrogatives are not addressed to the reader at all. They apostrophically invite other parties into the poem: "Oxen that rattle the yoke or halt in the shade, what is that you express in your eyes? / It seems to me more than all the print I have read in my life" (*Complete*, 37). Some closed interrogatives are hypothetical, with the speaker not really expecting an answer: "If you were not breathing and walking here where would they all be? / The most renowned poems would be ashes Orations and plays would be vacuums" (*Complete*, 94). (This passage nicely demonstrates the centrality of *audience* to Whitman's conception of theatrical performance; without audience participation, play-performances "would be vacuums," meaningless and empty.) Some of the closed interrogatives ask questions that the speaker immediately answers, rendering the reader's answer unnecessary: "Which of the young men does she like the best? / Ah the homeliest of them is beautiful to her" (*Complete*, 94). This interrogative occurs in the midst of one of Whitman's lyric passages; as such, the reader doesn't know the answer to the question and the speaker-actor must provide the answer. Finally, some closed interrogatives are simple *yes-no* options that do not require extensive space for reader response: "Have you heard it was good to gain the day? / I also say it is good to fall battles are lost in the same spirit in which they are won" (*Complete*, 44). The reader's answer here matters little—Whitman asks the question only as a lead-in to his next line. We might say that the closed interrogatives nip at the reader's heels, allowing him/her no rest: "I teach straying from me, yet who can stray from me? / I follow you whoever you are from the present hour; / My words itch at your ears till you understand them" (*Complete*, 83-84).

28 The word *soul* appears 63 times in the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*—and a whopping 247 times in the 1891-92 edition. *Souls* plural adds another 8 and 21 to the counts, respectively.

29 Walt Whitman, "Seeing Niagara to Advantage."

30 "Whitman in the German-Speaking Countries," in *Walt Whitman and the World*, ed. Gay Wilson Allen (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005), 160-172.

31 Ackerman reads this poem as repeating the conventions of the opera, not the theatre (56, 58).

32 “Cradle” was first published in the *New-York Saturday Press* (December 24, 1859) as “A Child’s Reminiscence.”

33 See Gay Wilson Allen’s *The Solitary Singer: A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman*.

34 “In Other Words: Breaking the Monologue in Whitman, Williams, and Hughes,” in *Language and Literature* 9 (2000), 25–41.